

**Women dancing the morris in Fletcher and Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen*,
1613-2015**

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Abstract: This essay analyses how the morris dance in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* – a crucial moment in the play's treatment of gender and class rank – intervenes in seventeenth-century debates about the cultural function of morris dancing and especially of women's roles within it. The essay considers what morris dancing might have signified at the play's composition and earliest performances by analysing it alongside its courtly source, seventeenth-century pamphlets, and dances inserted in other professional plays, and it examines how modern performances have remade the scene. While the play text empowers its female dancers, most twentieth- and twenty-first-century performances have limited their authority and made the dance into a scene that highlights the oppression of women. Two recent student performances in the U.S. and New Zealand have reframed the play's morris as a dance that enables women to embrace playful bawdiness, seek reward, or resist social expectations.

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The Two Noble Kinsmen is a strange play that has long occupied a tenuous position in the Shakespearean canon. At its centre is a morris dance, widely attributed to John Fletcher and appropriated from a 1613 anti-masque by Francis Beaumont. A motley squad of countrymen and women plan this dance in 2.3, and aided by the lost, lovesick Jailer's Daughter, they perform it in the woods for the duke, his wife, and their train in 3.5. N. W. Bawcutt asserted in his 1977 edition of the play that these scenes are neither necessary nor interesting, and the play's performance history reveals that theatre practitioners and spectators have felt similarly unsure what to make of them. The play text's descriptions of the morris dance indeed invite multiple interpretations. Stage directions ask simply for 'Musicke' and 'Dance' (sig. G3v), and the dance's main deviser, Gerald the Schoolmaster, labels it 'a morris', which he deconstructs as 'this mighty "Moor" – of mickle weight – / "Ice" now comes in, which, being glued together, / Makes "morris"' (3.5.110, 120-2).¹ Gerald's prologue introduces a procession of mixed-couple dancers: a May Lord and Lady, chambermaid and servant, tavern host and his wife, a clown, and

an apish creature he calls the ‘Bavian’ (sig. G3v), which the Oxford Shakespeare editors emend to ‘babion’ (3.5.134). Compared to other inserted morris dances in the early modern professional theatre, the one in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is atypical in that it lacks two staples of morris dancing: a hobbyhorse and a clearly identified Maid Marian. It is also unique among professional plays in its inclusion of female morris dancers – roles that, like all female characters, would have been played by boy actors in the play’s earliest performances.

My interest in this scene emerged from my experience as a confused spectator. A 2014 performance by the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company staged earnest country folk dancing the morris. Four men and four women danced in a circle banging sticks and shaking bells on their wrists and ankles in a seemingly haphazard fashion. The actor playing the ‘babion’ wore a monkey costume and flung his tail enthusiastically until it landed between his legs in a sexually suggestive manner, while he appeared oblivious to this action’s bawdiness. The others broke out of their circle and into the ridiculous ‘chicken dances’ from the television series *Arrested Development*. It made little sense but was highly entertaining. The Jailer’s Daughter led the morris cheerily, but her descent into physical violence – when she screamed and punched her partner to end the scene – complicated the otherwise joyous dance. I later asked the actors why the dance led to an apparent nervous breakdown, and they emphasised the bizarre qualities of the morris: its loud noises, incongruent movements, and mismatched choreography were destined to drive the less stable into madness.² I was intrigued by the dissonance between this interpretation – in which morris dancing inevitably leads to a woman’s mental distress and enactment of physical violence – and my own reading of the scene as critiquing a masculinist perspective. How, I wondered, did seventeenth-century audiences understand the morris tradition, and how

gendered was it? What might the play text and performances of the scene reveal about gender roles at different historical moments?

Recent scholarship on the play has focused on its collaborative authorship, analysed its adaptation of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, and offered feminist and queer readings of the Jailer's Daughter and same-sex friendships.³ But the dance has received little sustained attention except for essays by William Engel, who argues that it functions as a Dance of Death to usher in tragedy, and Sujata Iyengar, for whom it asserts an emergent national identity through an encounter with foreignness. Engel and Iyengar focus primarily on the connection between morris dance and Moors; this essay shifts focus to uncover the play's assumptions about gender in Shakespeare's time and ours. My research indicates that early modern audiences understood morris dancing as a popular trend that crossed social boundaries, encapsulated tensions surrounding Sabbatarian conflict, and could include dancers of both genders. The fact that the play's female dancers were played by boys might have encouraged spectators to see these roles as transparent performances of femininity or contemplate the exclusion of women from this particular stage. But although these female characters were the fictional product of a masculinist theatre, they still reveal its culture's ideas about women and their social roles.⁴ The play text of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* emphasises that female characters are crucial to its dance's success and underscores how actual women could use morris dancing to invert expected gender roles and assert authority. Although we might expect male-acted commercial plays to represent female performers negatively, Fletcher and Shakespeare's play reveals a positive cultural attitude toward women's performances.

This essay begins with historicised analysis of the play text then examines recent performances of the scene, arguing that some of the most important and innovative work on the

play's dance has come from the stage rather than from academic publications. Modern performances in the U.K., U.S., and New Zealand have interpreted the dance quite differently than the perspective suggested by its early modern contexts. As theatre practitioners aimed to infuse the country scenes with humour for audiences far removed from the play text's culturally specific references, many limited the authority offered female dancers by downplaying women's contributions or identifying the dance as destructive for women. Whether in the seventeenth or twenty-first century, the play's morris dance has repeatedly provided opportunities for contemplating shifting gender roles in the present compared to assumptions about the past or ideas about the future.

Morris dancing in 1613, or: why is there a morris in this play?

It is difficult to define morris dancing in 1613, the probable date of the play's initial performance, without being influenced by the form's evolution since.⁵ Archival records are patchy and oblique, but John Forrest, Claire Sponsler, and other historians of the form tend to agree on one central tenant: its main characteristic is change. There is no single 'traditional' morris dance. Instead, it was an adaptable form that drew from a variety of sources, evolved continuously, and crossed boundaries of social rank. It began as a medieval courtly form and later moved into urban and rural spaces; by 1613, it had become a fashionable popular trend and was seen primarily as a country sport (Forrest 49-60; Hutton 262-76; Sponsler 84-113). To consider what a morris dance might have signified at the play's earliest performances, I offer a range of contemporary contexts: other staged and printed representations of morris dancing, debates about the morality of traditional revels, Fletcher's other works, and Beaumont's anti-

masque. Together these sources create an image of a familiar, lively ritual in which cultural anxieties about gender, national and racial identity, social rank, and religion intersect.

According to descriptions of morris dancing in Renaissance professional plays, the form's key defining characteristic was its style of jump – a vigorous, jerky leap – but it seems to have required no specific choreography.⁶ Likewise, dancers were almost always accompanied by a tabor and pipe, but the dance seems to have required no specific tune. Plays and pamphlets describe early modern morris dancing using the same set of descriptive words: 'lustily', 'lively', 'merrily', 'jerk', 'trip', and 'tickle'. These words connote immense pleasure, vitality, impatient desire, and light steps combined with sharp, abrupt leaping. Dancers moved either in a ring or in partners; *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (ca. 1592) features both ('trot the ring twice ouer' and 'Two, and two, let vs rove') (sig. B4r). Dancers wore jingling bells and flowing scarves or handkerchiefs tied to their shoulders (see Figure 1), and they performed a fairly consistent cast of characters taken from Robin Hood stories. The royal entertainment at Kenilworth Castle (1575) included 'a lyuely morrisdauns' with six dancers plus Maid Marian and a fool (*A Letter* sig. D3v), and Jonson's *Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621) claimed that all morris dances needed a 'Maid Marian' and a 'Friar' (lines 424-5). Inserted morris dances sometimes require rehearsal and sometimes do not, suggesting that the dance's basic elements were well-known and that rehearsals were about feeling confident before a social better, not about learning a new dance for the first time. Likewise, no play provides detailed direction about the dance's steps, implying either a shared familiarity that made description unnecessary or the expectation that dancers would improvise.

Morris dancing is regularly associated with merry drinking and drunkenness, and by 1613, it had come to represent tensions between church reformers and English tradition. In

Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the Dauphin mentions 'a Whitsun morris-dance' (2.4.25), reminding us that morris dances were often performed at and associated with Whitsun ales, the holiday parish festival that involved large amounts of ale drinking. The dance's vigorous steps and connection with holiday drinking leads characters in *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (ca. 1599) to describe its performers as 'mad' (11.69). Similarly, Warbeck in *The Witch of Edmonton* (ca. 1621) says, 'Absurdity's in my opinion ever the best dancer in a morris' (3.4.6-7). Some printed attacks and episcopal injunctions against the dance appeared in the late Elizabethan period, and Philip Stubbes' *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) captures well the Puritan attitude toward 'heathen' morris dancers who interrupted church service with their 'deuils daunce' and 'their pipers pipeing, their drummers thundring, their stumps dauncing, their bells iynghing, their handkerchefts swinging about their heds like madmen' (sig. M2v). Although the Privy Council banned morris dances on Sundays in 1592, Elizabeth never publicly supported or condemned Sunday pastimes (Douglas 39-46; Parker 41-138). Under the Stuart kings, the debate grew more contentious. Several bills that limited or prohibited morris dancing were introduced in Parliament from 1606 to 1621, and James attempted to maintain royal control in the face of growing Puritan sympathy by issuing the Book of Sports (1618), which made morris dancing lawful on Sundays so long as it did not interfere with church service (Douglas 71-91).⁷ The book touted the virtues of Sunday pastimes: to make the Church of England appeal to papists who might convert, to make men physically fit and ready for war, and to keep commoners out of trouble.

In the two decades following its first performance, the play's morris dance helped keep it topical amidst this heightened conflict. It was likely revived for performance in the 1620s and first published in 1634. Although the first quarto's title page does not advertise its morris dance, several factors indicate that readers would have encountered the play in the context of

controversy surrounding traditional revelry. Charles I had reissued and enforced the Book of Sports the previous year in response to anti-revelry publications, attempts to suppress revels, and perhaps encouragement from Archbishop Laud (Douglas 102-25; Parker 178-216). His renewal of the book encouraged court revivals of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays that ‘portrayed the old sports sympathetically’ (Marcus 14), and the publication of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* might have been part of the same trend. Its publisher John Waterson was probably a royalist and was developing specialties in professional drama and Laudian texts – both of which can accurately describe the first printed edition of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (Lesser 194; Potter 149). The royalist-Puritan lines were not yet clearly drawn in 1613, and although it might be safe to assume that theatre-goers supported various kinds of pastimes, individual audience members might have conceived of morris dancing as innocent fun or riotous heathenism, as patriotic or blasphemous, or with more ambivalence, as I will suggest the play text itself does.

Morris dancers aimed to celebrate local and national communities. When the shoemakers perform a morris dance in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, they do so to honour the Lord Mayor and their guild, and the morris dance in Fletcher’s *Women Pleased* (ca. 1619–1623) includes a shout ‘for the honour of our Towne’ (4.1). Morris dancing also helped to define and venerate white Englishness through its probable use of blackface.⁸ The name ‘morris’ seems to have derived from a Spanish dance called ‘moresca’ or ‘Moorish dance’. E. K. Chambers speculates that dancers began blackening their faces simply to mask their identity and that the association with Moors came later (193-6). Regardless of whether the act originated as conscious mimicry, evidence suggests that Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences saw a connection between morris and ‘Moorish’ (Smith 143-4; Garry 224-5; Laroque 120-36). The entry for ‘Morisque’ in Cotgrave’s 1611 French-English dictionary reads: ‘A Morris (or Moorish) daunce’ (sig. Hhh4v, qtd. in

Brissenden 1). None of the professional plays specify whether their morris dancers wore blackface, although the company in Munday's *John a Kent and John a Cumber* (ca. 1587) identifies the need for one dancer to 'play the Moore' (lines 365-6).

The morris dance in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* would therefore have signalled associations with English and local identities, energetic movement, drinking, and growing conflict about church reform and traditional sports. It is likely that this particular play includes a morris dance because Fletcher thought it would please his audiences.⁹ In a defence that prefaces the first quarto of *The Faithful Shepherdess* (ca. 1608), Fletcher explained that because the play featured rustic characters, audiences expected certain conventions that were absent, especially 'missing whitsun ales ... & morris-dances', so they 'began to be angry' (sig. ¶2v). His preface implies that morris dances were common enough for audiences to anticipate them in plays featuring country folk. Fletcher's note does not reveal adoration for morris dancing but identifies the form as an audience favourite, somewhat akin to John Forrest's conclusion that staged morris dances offered audiences 'comic relief' and 'authentic rusticity' (257). *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, written with Beaumont the same year as *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, includes a speech that celebrates morris dancing and other May games, and about a decade later, Fletcher inserted a morris dance in *Women Pleased*. The dance's royalist organiser, Soto, resists a Captain's attempts to turn his dancers into soldiers by protesting that all dukes love May games, and another dancer insists that morris dancing will unite the community and save it from destruction: 'if this go not forward, I foresee friends, / This war will fright our neighbours out o'th villages' (4.1.132-3). Members of the company scoff at the 'fits' and 'blind zeale' of their hobbyhorse, Bomby, who has recently converted to Puritanism (4.1.141-2), and Soto forces him to dance by threatening violence and punishment in the stocks. Gordon McMullan has argued that Fletcher's

plays and social network reveal sympathy for radical Protestantism and critique of the Stuart court, and he suggests that *Women Pleased* underscores some degree of truth in the Puritan opposition to morris dancing even as it ridicules that opposition (130-1). Together these three Fletcherian examples indeed reveal ambivalence toward morris dancing and underscore the unresolved polemical debate beneath its apparent audience-pleasing fun.

The morris dance's status as popular festivity would have been only part of a seventeenth-century audience's context for the dance in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. It was adapted from Beaumont's *Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn*, performed at Whitehall on 20 February 1613 for Princess Elizabeth's wedding.¹⁰ It focused on the marriage of the rivers Thames and Rhine, which represented the British Elizabeth and the German Frederick, and included duelling anti-masques by Jupiter's messenger Mercury and Juno's messenger Iris. Anti-masques, fairly new devices in 1613, were typically comic and grotesque. Jupiter first presented dancing nymphs and stars, but Iris scoffed at this device for being 'but of one Sexe, which could haue no life' and therefore being void of vitality or liveliness, key qualities in successful revels (sig. B2v; 'Life'). Mercury tried again by producing blind cupids and rigid statues who danced in 'strange' ways (sig. B2v). After mocking this device as well, Iris presented a second anti-masque of 'Rurall company' engaging in 'May-games with their Countrey sports' (sig. C3r). The printed text describes it as follows:

The second Anti-masque rush in, daunce their Measure, and as rudely depart; consisting of a Pedant, May Lord, May Lady; Seruingman, Chambermaide; A Countrey Clowne, or Shepheard, Countrey Wench; An Host, Hostesse; A Hee Baboone, Shee Baboone; A Hee Foole, Shee Foole vshering them in. All these persons, apparelled to the life, the Men issuing out of one side of the Boscage, and the Woemen from the other: the Musicke, was

extremely well fitted, hauing such a spirit of Countrey iolitie as can hardly be imagined; but the perpetuall laughter and applause was aboue the Musicke. The dance likewise was of the same strain; and the Dancers, or rather Actors, expressed euery one their part so naturally and aptly, as when a Man's eye was caught with the one, and then past on to the other, hee could not satisfie himselfe which did best. It pleased his Maiestie to call for it againe at the end, as he did likewise for the first Anti-masque; but one of the *Statuaes* by that time was vndressed. (sig. C3r-C3v)

As the description makes clear, this anti-masque was 'rude', 'rushed', and designed for laughs. The text claims it was successfully comic, and the elite crowd enjoyed watching a joyful appropriation of a country trend. When the text refers to the dancers as 'Actors', it supports the theory that professional male actors performed all parts. The audience might have understood it as a morris dance, especially if a known company of morris dancers performed it, but the text never uses the word 'morris' or refers to any figure or music that conventionally marks a morris. Whatever the kind of dance, it was innovative in offering a hodgepodge of characters. The text notes that while anti-masques typically featured 'suted' dancers of one kind (such as all satyrs or all witches), Iris' anti-masque consisted of 'a confusion or commixture of all such persons as are naturall and proper for Countrey sports' (sig. B3r). Through this innovation, it emphasised coupling, as did the rest of the wedding masque, and argued that a dance could not succeed without female parts, even those performed by cross-dressed men.

Together with the main masque – which featured '*Olympian Knights*' and claimed to be a prelude to the revived Olympic games (sig. B3r) – these anti-masques were designed to please a specific audience: the king, who believed in the value of country sports to royal authority, and the members of Gray's Inn. One of their own, Robert Dover, had taken over the Cotswold

Games the previous year and renamed them the Cotswold Olympics (Whitfield 13-14). Leah Marcus has noted that court performances from 1612 to 1614 involved a large amount of anti-Puritan rhetoric, and the 1613 masque fits well into this trend (28). It endorsed country revels for the king's sake and celebrated Dover's games through topical allusion, even as it allowed its courtly audience to laugh at the comedy of rusticity. The anti-masque was not a parody of country sports, but an elite-focused endorsement.

When Fletcher and Shakespeare appropriate it, their play is more ambivalent about whether it admires or critiques its source, morris dancing, and the king's agenda. Early performances of the play might have parodied the masque, as McMullen has argued (105-6), or offered more straightforward access to a noteworthy court experience. The first quarto's title page tells us it was performed for a commercial crowd at Blackfriars, and the audience might very well have identified the dance as a recent anti-masque. Or perhaps the surviving edition of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* represents a court performance, which Richard Dutton and Tiffany Stern have both tentatively suggested (Dutton 282-3; Stern 151-3). In that case, the inserted dance would have offered a belated encore presentation of a device James enjoyed. Because these are all reasonable speculations, we should consider the possibility that the play's morris dance spoke simultaneously to commercial and elite audiences, which the boundary-crossing form was well positioned to do.

Performing gender, or: why are there women in this morris?

The Two Noble Kinsmen could have had only male country folk perform its dance, like the 'rude mechanicals' perform *Pyramis and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (3.2.9), but it instead has country women dance for the duke within the fiction of its play. In fact, *The Two*

Noble Kinsmen is the only known professional play in the period to include morris dancers who are female characters. Others make morris dancing the sport of lower-class men: a bonding activity or a way to arouse women. Several identify women as crucial audience members; a character in *Women Pleased* notes that if the morris dance were interrupted, ‘all the wenches in the Country’ will ‘curse ye’ (4.1.114-5). *The Witch of Edmonton* nearly features a woman dancing the morris when characters consider inviting the witch Mother Sawyer, even though the morris usually involves ‘no woman’s part but Maid Marian and the hobby-horse’ (3.1.9-10). They worry that Mother Sawyer might bring the devil to the dance – a playful mocking of polemicists’ concerns about morris dancing – and eventually decide to have the barber’s boy play the witch ‘because he can show his art better than another’ (3.1.69). Never do they express concern about Mother Sawyer’s gender or label morris dancing a male activity. These examples invite the question: did women typically dance the morris? A recent essay in the online magazine *Atlas Obscura* captures the current popular thinking about the gendered history of morris dancing. It defines the ‘traditional’ morris dance as a ‘gathering of men’ wearing white clothes and bells and dancing with sticks or handkerchiefs, and it views the inclusion of women as an invention of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Young-Brown). But the notion that morris dancing was an all-male rite is a myth we have inherited from the Victorian period and especially from Cecil Sharp, an early twentieth-century revivalist of the form whose ideas about morris dancing have profoundly shaped current practice.¹¹

In fact, morris dancing has long involved women, at least dating from the Elizabethan period if not earlier.¹² In *A Dialogue agaynst light, lewde, and lasciuious dauncing* (1582), Christopher Fetherston provides evidence for the practice of men playing Maid Marian in May games when he rails against the costuming of ‘men in womans apparell, whom you doe most

commonely call maymarrions ... I my selfe haue seene in a may gaime a troupe, the greater part wherof hath been men, and yet haue they been attyred so like vnto women, that theyr faces being hidde (as they were in deede) a man coulde not discerne them from women' (sig. D7r-D7v). He notes that the dance troupe is *mostly* but not exclusively men, and his concern that spectators might misinterpret their gender implies that women must have danced in May games too. The Book of Sports somewhat corroborates this idea by identifying dancing as lawful 'either for men or women' (sig. B2r). John Forrest's extensive research on the history of morris dancing also uncovered evidence of women dancers in the Renaissance and earlier. He speculates that Maid Marian began as an actual woman and was later played by cross-dressed men, and he argues that mixed-couple morris dancing was normal in the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods (Forrest 279). Court masques and other revels routinely included both cross-dressed male actors and female performers, so it is also possible that morris dancing featured brawny, cross-dressed Maid Marians alongside female dancers.

One pamphlet, William Kemp's narrative about dancing the morris from Norwich to London, offers more explicit evidence of female dancers. As Peter Parolin has recently argued, *Kemps nine daies vvonder* (1600) foregrounds the positive contributions of two local women to Kemp's dance. The first woman, a fourteen-year-old in his friend's household at Chelmsford, asked Kemp if she 'might daunce the Morrice with me in a great large roome', and Kemp agreed 'to fit her with bels' and 'napkins on her armes' (sig. B2r). He was impressed that a 'whole houre she held out ... thus much in her praise, I would haue challenged the strongest man in Chelmsford, and amongst many I thinke few would have done so much' (sig. B2r). The second passage describes 'a lusty Country lasse' who emerged from the crowd to mock a man who could not keep up with Kemp (sig. B3v). She called him 'faint hearted' and said, 'if I had begun

to daunce, I would have held out one myle though it had cost my life' (sig. B3v). The crowd laughed, but she pressed on: 'Nay saith she, if the Dauncer will lend me a leash of his belles, Ile venter to treade one mile with him my selfe' (sig. B3v). Kemp narrated their dance in the pamphlet:

I lookt upon her, saw mirth in her eies, heard boldnes in her words, and beheld her ready to tucke up her russet petticoate, I fitted her with bells: which [s]he merrily taking, garisht her thicke short legs, and with a smooth brow bad the Tabrer begin. The Drum strucke, forward marcht I with my merry Mayde-marian: who shooke her fat sides: and footed it merrily to Melfoord, being a long myle. There parting with her, I gave her (besides her skin full of drinke) an English crowne to buy more drinke, for good wench she was in a pittious heate: my kindnes she requited with dropping some dozen of short courtesies, and bidding God blesse the Dauncer, I bad her adieu: and to give her her due, she had a good care, daunst truely, and wee parted friendly. (sig. B3v)

Kemp might try to 'contain her rhetorically' by describing her body comically, but he works with her, respects her, admires her ability, and makes her the centre of attention for two pages of his slim pamphlet (Parolin 57). Neither woman needed Kemp to teach her the morris, and both were worth recording because they could keep up with him, something his pamphlet repeatedly claims few could do.

Any discussion of gender in morris dancing should confront a final key characteristic of the seventeenth-century form: its notorious bawdiness. Morris dances often involved sexually charged wooing of a female figure, such as a mimed courtship of Maid Marian, and erotic play involving a hobbyhorse. In *Jack Drum's Entertainment* by John Marston (1600), two characters excitedly banter about 'the wenches' who will watch the morris dance, and one reminisces about

his younger days when he could ‘tickle the Minikin, and made them crie thankes sweete *Timothy*’ (sig. A3r). To ‘tickle the Minikin’ is to play the lute, but also to stroke a young woman (‘Minikin’). The play’s morris dance then features a song with these lyrics: ‘Skip it, & trip it, nimbly, nimbly, tickle it, tickle it, lustily, / Strike vp the Taber, for the wenches fauor, tickle it, tickle it, lustily’ (sig. A3v). The play uses the same language to describe morris dancing and sex acts, with the implication that success at the former might lead to success at the latter. In *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, Rafe speaks of morris dancing in a ring while ‘The Lords and Ladies now abroad for their disport and play, / Do kisse sometimes upon the Grasse, and sometimes in the Hey’ (interlude 4.41-2). Whether Rafe envisions the ‘Ladies’ as dancers or spectators, his lines anticipate that morris dancing will inspire sexual encounters. Kemp’s book reveals that the dance’s erotic element could empower female dancers. In his narrative, women participate as his equals and exploit the occasion for their own ends, thereby showing that ‘local and occasional performance could be a powerful means for women to construct and communicate desired self-images’ (Parolin 49). They embrace the chance to assert themselves; as Parolin says, they ‘seem to understand the erotic potential of performance, accepting it as integral to their self-display’ (52).

Like other staged morrises, the planning and execution of the dance in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* includes some bawdy language, and, like the women in Kemp’s narrative, the female morris dancers embrace or resist the bawdiness as best serves them. When we meet the male rustics in 2.3, their conversation involves misogynist fantasies about controlling their wives. They grumble that their wives have challenged their decision to abandon work and participate in country sports, and they offer such crude conclusions as ‘Clap her aboard tomorrow night and stow her, / And all’s made up again’ and ‘put / A fescue in her fist and you shall see her / Take a

new lesson out and be a good wench' (2.3.33-6). These lines underscore the men's frustrations at their lack of control at home and foreshadow the country women's resistances in the dance that follows. The scene also reveals that they dance primarily to represent certain communities when the second countryman proclaims that he will dance 'for our town' and 'for the weavers' (2.3.50-2). When the men decide to perform after the town's main sporting event, the third countryman says, 'We'll see the sports, then every man to's tackle' and invites the others to rehearse 'before the ladies see us and do sweetly, and God knows what may come on't' (2.3.59-62). The fourth countryman concurs: 'the sports once ended, we'll perform' (2.3.63-4). Some editors and actors have found sexual innuendo in 'tackle', 'perform', and 'God knows what'. But while this language is somewhat eroticised, the men remain predominantly focused on the hope of Theseus' favour and performing their parts well. The words 'tackle' and 'perform' can straightforwardly refer to their dancing, and the men emphasise their hope that Hippolyta and Emilia – the 'ladies' of whom they speak – will help them earn favour. These countrymen might be preparing a dance known for its bawdiness, but they are not singularly focused on sex. Instead, they have high hopes for the political and monetary outcome of their dance.

Together with the morris itself, this scene reveals that female devisers, performers, and audience members are crucial to the dance's success. The countrymen explain in 2.3 that the plan to perform for the duke originated with a woman's desire to meet him. Gerald the Schoolmaster is motivated to lead the dance because he desires to please the tanner's daughter, who 'must see the Duke, and she must dance too' (2.3.46-7). This line again indicates hope that the dance might propel its participants to the centre of political action, even though the tanner's daughter hopes only to see the duke rather than to effect political change. When one of the female dancers fails to appear at the planned occasion in 3.5, the countrymen agree that they cannot put on the show

without enough women, thereby echoing Iris' insistence in Beaumont's anti-masque that female dancers are a vital component of successful devices. The Jailer's Daughter saves the performance when she wanders distractedly into rehearsal and joins the dance. The countrymen underscore in several lines that Emilia and Hippolyta are especially important spectators who will determine the dance's success. When the two ladies announce their approval at the end ('Never so pleased' and "'Twas an excellent dance'), Gerald's final line attributes the dance's outcome to the female dancers when he says, 'Ye have danced rarely, wenches' (3.5.150, 160).

The play text suggests that such performances can expose women to unwanted sexual attention, but it also represents morris dancing as a space in which women assert authority safely. As the dancers prepare and perform for the nobles, some of the men's lines about the countrywomen indeed carry sexual innuendo, such as 'freckled Nell, that never failed her master' (3.5.27). When Gerald addresses the female dancers, he instructs them to 'Swim with your bodies / And carry it sweetly and deliverly, / And now and then a favour and a frisk' (3.5.28-30). These lines might accompany Gerald's unwelcome advances, as 'favour' could mean kiss and 'frisk' could signal touching, and it would make sense within the scene for him to grab or pinch as he delivers the lines. But the women respond with effective resistance. The scene's first line spoken by a woman comes from Nell, who resists Gerald's instructions. When he advises her how to use her body, she says, 'Let us alone, sir' (3.5.31), a line that either condemns his inappropriate behaviour or declares the women's ability to dance without instruction. The Jailer's Daughter enters singing to herself and uses her next line to declare Gerald a fool – an apt observation, as Gerald fits well into a literary tradition of pompous schoolmasters, such as Rombus in Sidney's *The Lady of May* and Holofernes in *Love's Labor's Lost*. The Daughter declares herself a willing participant when she invites her partner or the

others to begin by saying, ‘Shall we dance, ho?’ (3.5.82). She then insists she take the lead. Mary Ellen Lamb argues that morris dancing signified a ‘bold sexuality’ (74), and like Kemp’s book, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* reveals that it did so for both genders. Its women use their roles to contribute playfully to the dance’s erotic undertones and to invert expected gender roles, and no male characters offer complaints or vexed statements in response. In her analysis of the scene, Iyengar identifies the potential for female empowerment (which she calls ‘insurrection’) in morris dancing, but she interprets the dance as signifying a gendered power struggle (89-91). The play text does not treat the countrywomen’s interventions as dangerous or abnormal; in fact, it assumes that any woman walking by the rustics would be familiar enough with the ritual to join them. It underscores what a small cohort of theatre historians have been arguing for the past two decades: women regularly performed on various ‘stages’ besides the ‘all-male’ one in early modern England (Brown and Parolin; Stokes). Despite the alarmist cries of a few well-known Puritan writers, they did so without causing a major social upheaval.

From a feminist perspective, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is an unsettling play that offers its central female characters unsatisfying endings: the Daughter’s male doctor insists that the best cure for her madness is sex with a buffoonish Wooer who pretends to be someone else, Emilia uses her mere three lines in the final scene to express helplessness and deep sadness, and Hippolyta has nothing to say. Although Theseus takes women’s advice earlier in the play, he listens to no female counsel at its end. Like Philip J. Finkelpearl, I interpret the play text as critiquing an outdated honour code, a central theme that would resonate in different ways with audiences of multiple ranks (184-99). But the lively morris dance stands apart from the rest of the strictly structured, honour-obsessed Athenian world as it identifies potential for social change in its empowered women. At the play’s composition, the dance represented a current popular

trend, and I propose that it is the most progressive part of the play. It endorses mixed-sex dancing, a type of festivity that especially worried Sabbatarian writers, without overtly condoning or critiquing the use of traditional revels as royalist propaganda. In the play text, the dance pleases the duke and elite ladies, and it provides a safe outlet for the commoners' ambitions and energies. Although we might therefore interpret the play's dance as conservative, as Claire Sponsler argues of morris dancing more generally (99), the play text's treatment of female dancers suggests a slightly different effect. It invites us to see the Athenian world, with women needing to submit to forced and arranged marriages, as an antiquated past and the country morris, which provides a subversive space for women, as potential for the future.

Remaking the scene, or: what can a modern morris do?

When female actors started to perform the play's fictional women on Restoration and later stages, the morris dance often became *more* masculinist, or at least less celebratory and enabling for its female characters. The most successful Restoration adaptation, William Davenant's *The Rivals* (1664), breaks from earlier definitions of morris dancing as licensed madness and interprets its morris as a serious, male-dominated enterprise. The Jailer's Daughter, now named Celania, is not allowed to join the dance. When she enters singing, the first countryman says, 'Woman avoid: if it be your vocation to be mad, / Pray be mad in some more fitting place; / This is no place for mad folks' (264).¹³ He adds that although 'we are about a morrice, / 'tis no mad morrice' and suggests they practice elsewhere because 'my spirit is too big to put up the least / Affront offer'd me by a woman' (264). When Davenant's country folk later perform the dance, the first countryman's prologue mentions only one female role: 'that ugly carrion / Which country batchelors do call maid-Marrion' (267). No lines or stage directions

clarify whether a female dancer or cross-dressed man took this role, but the emphasis on ‘ugly’ hints that it is a man, and the stage direction ‘They dance’ does not illuminate whether any women dance with the men. Although Heraclia (the revised Emilia) is present for the dance, she says nothing. This adaptation transforms a dance in which female dancers and spectators are central into a performance orchestrated by men for a male monarch.

Meanwhile, there was no known performance of the original script after the 1620s until an Old Vic revival in 1928, and several of the earliest twentieth-century productions cut the morris dance entirely.¹⁴ A highly sexualised dance in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 1986 production has shaped modern interpretations of the scene. In the 1980s, historians believed morris dancing originated as a male-dominated folk fertility ritual, and the RSC production exaggerated the scene’s sexual innuendo to represent the dance as a fertility rite that contributed to the Jailer’s Daughter’s madness. The scene’s ‘crude and joyous celebration of sexuality and natural fertility’ began with the Jailer’s Daughter being led onstage by Gerald and two countrymen (Shewring 121). She entered wearing a bridle and sitting on an enormous leather phallus, which then doubled as a maypole and ejaculated white silk ribbons on the nobles. Reviewers noted that Emilia and Hippolyta reacted with ‘icy disapproval’ and that the ‘cheaply comic’ dance revealed ‘the production’s distrust of the play’ because it necessitated turning Hippolyta’s positive response to the dance into irony (Warren 83; Holland 197-8). It made the morris dance a performance of male sexuality that engulfed and damaged the women in attendance. The production portrayed the Daughter as a victim of masculine oppression, in line with influential feminist Shakespeare scholarship of the 1980s and in a similar way as the RSC’s *Hamlet* two years earlier showed the ‘destructive effects of male chauvinism on women’s lives’ (Barker, *Early Modern* 45).

Most other modern versions of the scene have followed suit by staging a critique of morris dancing as a tradition that victimizes or corrupts women. In a 2013 St. Louis Shakespeare performance, giggling rustic women let themselves be fondled and objectified early in the scene, and when the Jailer's Daughter entered, three countrymen leered at her with their arms around each other, elbowed one another, and grinned while imagining her 'rarest gambles' and declaring that 'we are made' – lines that are not bawdy in context but that they made grossly sexual (3.5.76-7). When Gerald said to 'lead her in', one of the men threw her over his shoulder and ran offstage while she went limp (3.5.89). The other country folk performed part of the prologue but not the dance itself because the gentles were so unimpressed that they dismissed the dancers quickly. The Jailer's Daughter did not appear again in the scene, and her absence gave the impression that she was being exploited offstage. In the performances directed by Darko Tresnjak (New York Shakespeare Festival in 2003, Old Globe Theatre in San Diego in 2004, and Chicago Shakespeare Theater in 2006), his heavily cut script had the Jailer's Daughter encounter not a mixed-sex company, but three menacing, masked, and male country monsters who drunkenly captured her to dance with them. Other productions in the 1990s and 2000s made the Jailer's Daughter either too lethargic to participate actively in the dance or so far gone that the dance ended with her collapsing or attacking others, as did the Cincinnati Shakespeare performance.¹⁵ These performances did not align spectators with the rustics, but presented the country dancers as rude and oversexed characters who belch loudly or pick their noses. Yet the play text enables other options. It has the female dancers enjoy participating not because they are simpletons who have no better options, but because the dance offers them power, even if temporarily. Although Gerald scolds the group for being 'dunces' (3.5.11), we do not need to accept the condescension of a foolish character, and because the Jailer's Daughter's own lines

are the bawdiest in the scene, we have no reason to believe that the dance corrupts her. Even if modern renditions have intended to expose women's oppression, many have transformed the dance into a kind of Puritan lesson warning against the dangers of country revels and lower-class women who perform publically.

W. B. Worthen reminds us that performances of Shakespeare always take place in the present; they remake the text and transform it into something else (9, 24). The RSC production and the performances it influenced do more than interpret the play text: they change its morris dance when they place it in new contexts for new audiences. Yet although so many modern performances have encouraged us to understand the dance as oppressive for women or as an outlet for ridiculing country folk, two recent student performances offered an alternative when they remade the play's morris dance into forms a modern audience would more readily understand: a square dance and a flash mob. A 2015 performance at Baldwin Wallace University in Cleveland, Ohio, positioned its dance in a less-antiquated, love-obsessed world. The performance began not with the play text's prologue and song, but with the company singing Elvis Presley's 'Can't Help Falling in Love' and Ingrid Michaelson's upbeat 'Everybody', which repeats 'everybody wants to love' and 'everybody wants to be loved'. Director Adam Heffernan's abbreviated script repeatedly cut references to chivalric honour to focus on love. Hippolyta was no longer captured and subdued by Theseus (with 1.1.79-90 cut), the widowed queens became young and giggly, and when the Jailer's Daughter first met Palamon, the company sang Jack Johnson's 'Better Together', which advises that 'Love is the answer' and 'It's always better when we're together'. Characters showed little concern about social class and noble appearance. Instead of seeking food for Palamon, Arcite simply tossed him a flask and bag of Cheez Its. They did not dress each other in armour, have lengthy conversations in which they

had to remind themselves of their feud, or share a farewell conversation and embrace in 5.1. Shortened interactions between the two meant that they no longer worried about being ‘gentle’, ‘noble’, or ‘manly’. Meanwhile, the Jailer’s Daughter did not fret about her father; whereas the play text makes her anxious that he will be punished for Palamon’s escape, the performance cut part of 2.4 and all of 3.2 to eliminate that concern. Less worried about other matters, the Daughter, Arcite, and Palamon were simply consumed by love.

By the time the countrymen appeared on stage in 2.3 (as two male actors and two cross-dressed women wearing flannel, camouflage, and denim), the audience understood this world as one in which everyone was falling in love. Scene 3.5 offered a female-led dance in which ‘Master Gerald’ became ‘Mistress Gerald’, a boisterous woman with a long ponytail wearing a pink velour tracksuit and a whistle around her neck (see Figure 2). She instructed the other women to ‘swim with your Bodies’ as a way to show off her dance skills. The scene had no ‘babion’ and cut several lines that other productions interpreted as bawdy, including the reference to ‘freckled Nell’ (3.5.27), the Jailer’s Daughter labelling Gerald a ‘tinker’ and advising him to ‘Stop no more holes but what you should’ (3.5.83-4), and Gerald’s awkward farewell to the nobles in which he wishes them a prize stag and the ladies to ‘eat his dowsets’ (testicles) (3.5.158). The lines this performance cut are both the most dated and the bawdiest, which highlights the scene’s central problem for modern directors: its humour relies on spectators’ understanding of culturally specific puns, including several moments when characters are unwittingly bawdy. To compensate for changes in slang in the past four hundred years, many directors amplify the sexual innuendo with exaggerated tones and gestures. But by cutting the bawdiness, Heffernan focused instead on jovial characters having fun and wanting to please the duke.

Because Mistress Gerald spoke only a few lines of the prologue and no one spelled out 'morris', Gerald seemed less annoyingly verbose than in the play text, and the changes opened up staging possibilities so the 'morris' dance could become a country square dance with four partners (see Figure 3). Three of the women expressed delight in their facial expressions and cheers, and the other was so nervous that she kept muttering about the noble audience watching her: 'they're still looking – oh my God'. The Jailer's Daughter smiled and danced with confidence. When she asked Mistress Gerald to dance, Gerald responded, 'I'll lead!' as the pair leaped across stage (3.5.91), and Hippolyta and Emilia cheered and applauded. The production's many female actors contributed to its positive portrayal of women and minimised the likelihood that audience members would see the Daughter as a victim.¹⁶

The 'morris dance' in a 2014 performance directed by Lori Leigh at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, began with country folk dancing around a maypole but broke into a flash mob with Gerald singing into a headset at the back of the stage. This Gerald was played by a male actor, but women played almost all of the country folk – some as female characters and some cross-dressed as men. They danced to a medley of songs that offered conflicting messages about sex and power: 'I'll Make Love to You' by Boyz II Men, 'Nobody to Love' by Sigma, 'Run the World (Girls)' by Beyonce, and 'S&M' by Rihanna. Although most dancers favoured contemporary moves that were crudely sexual, such as 'twerking', and although I felt somewhat unsettled watching young women gyrate to a brief excerpt from a song about sadomasochism, it was clear that the performance's countrywomen embraced the dance's eroticism. In fact, 'twerking' is a surprisingly adept analogue for morris dancing: a dance that features a specific kind of movement but no set choreography or music, represents popular trends and youthful

sexuality, has moved among social groups as it evolved, and is now fairly ubiquitous and comic in mainstream culture.

The example of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* indicates that inserted dances, masques, dumb shows, and pageants are especially fruitful areas for investigating how we try to make sense of the early modern past in which Shakespeare, Fletcher, and their contemporaries wrote, as well as how we use Shakespeare to understand the present. Read together with seventeenth-century descriptions of morris dancing, the play text of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* creates an image of empowered female morris dancers. But with the exception of two innovative student performances, most modern productions take the dance in a different direction. They reveal a desire to sidestep racial conflict by avoiding blackface and references to Moors but embrace the chance to confront women's oppression and exhibit bold sexuality. They assume vulgarity will be funny, they privilege love and lust rather than honour and tradition, and they often appear critical of country folk and female performers. But as both the play's seventeenth-century contexts and the most recent performances reveal, we can explore alternative ways of using the play's morris dance to interpret the past as we continue to remake *The Two Noble Kinsmen* to reflect our own time.

Notes

¹ Unless specified as citations from the 1634 first quarto, I quote *The Two Noble Kinsmen* from the Oxford Shakespeare. Scholars have suggested that the dancers could spell out ‘morris’ using placards or that Gerald could point to one dancer dressed as a Moor and another dressed somehow as ‘ice’ (Potter 404-5; Iyengar 94), although these lines are typically cut in modern performances.

² My conversation with the actors happened at a question-and-answer session arranged by Niamh O’Leary as part of a symposium on *The Two Noble Kinsmen* at Xavier University on May 3, 2014.

³ For a summary of the authorship dispute, see Lois Potter’s Arden³ edition (6-34), and for a recent examination of the play’s use of Chaucer, see Teramura. For examples of queer and feminist readings, see Bruster 145-70, Masten 49-60, Shannon 90-122, and Neely 69-98.

⁴ For an excellent synopsis and analysis of modern scholarship on boy actors, see Barker, ‘Not One’; she concludes that different viewers probably saw different things when they watched cross-dressed male actors play female roles.

⁵ For a concise explanation of the 1613 date, see Potter 39-40.

⁶ My discussion of staged morris dances draws on Olson 424-30 and Forrest 217-9. Professional plays with morris dances (besides *The Two Noble Kinsmen*) include Munday’s *John a Kent and John a Cumber* (ca. 1587), Nash’s *Summer’s Last Will and Testament* (ca. 1592), Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1599), Marston’s *Jacke Drums Entertainment* (1600), Ford, Dekker, and Rowley’s *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), Fletcher’s *Women Pleased* (1619-23), and Dekker and Ford’s *The Sun’s Darling* (1624). Morris dances also appear in Marston’s Inns of Court play *Histrion-Mastix* (1599), Holyday’s Oxford University play *Technogamia* (1618), Ward’s Latin

play *Fucus Sive Histriomastix* (1623), Randolph's courtly pastoral *Amyntas* (1632), and royal pageants at Kenilworth (1575) and Althorp (1603). Morris dances sometimes included a hobbyhorse or maypole, but neither was necessary in a seventeenth-century morris (Laroque 120-136; Lamb 63-88). Because I quote from some modern editions (when available) and some original texts on *Early English Books Online* (EEBO), I have modernised play titles in this list and in the text for consistency.

⁷ The full title of the 'Book of Sports' is *The King Maiesities Declaration to His Subiects, Concerning lawfull Sports to be vsed*. James issued this national proclamation following a local one in Lancashire the previous year.

⁸ For more on this function of blackface in period revels, see Stevens 99-100.

⁹ Suzanne Gossett has noted that Fletcher's collaborations with Beaumont frequently insert masques and courtly devices in their plays.

¹⁰ This masque, following those by Campion (*The Lords' Masque*, 14 Feb.) and Chapman (*Masque of the Middle Temple and Lincoln's Inn*, 15 Feb.), was planned for 16 Feb. but postponed due to the King's exhaustion. Multiple accounts identified Francis Bacon as directing the affairs, and it is likely that others collaborated, though scholars have not agreed as to whom (Edwards 127-30).

¹¹ For a fascinating discussion of Cecil's understanding of morris dancing as a masculine sport (and argument with suffragette Mary Neal about the topic), see Hutton 262-76.

¹² This point is far from universally accepted. In his 1999 analysis of the play's morris dance, Bruce R. Smith describes morris dancing as a male bonding exercise with a combat plot, in which knightly dancers fight for the favor of a cross-dressed man (146-8). In his 2011 study of the Book of Sports, Alistair Douglas defines morris dancing as 'A grotesque dance performed by

men in fancy costume' (xvii, my emphasis). In a 2010 book, Christopher Marsh argues that morris dancing was primarily, though not exclusively, a masculine enterprise in Renaissance England: 'nevertheless a recreation in which, on occasion, men could play women and women could play men' (349-50).

¹³ I quote *The Rivals* from *The Dramatic Works of Sir William D'Avenant* (Edinburgh, 1874), 5: 213-93.

¹⁴ To construct a performance history of the play's morris dance, I consulted Richmond, Metz, and Potter, and using the World Shakespeare Bibliography, I read reviews of all modern productions I could identify. With the exception of the 1986 RSC production (for which I consulted scholarly and popular reviews and production stills), I have seen every performance I discuss at length, either live (Chicago Shakespeare in 2006, Cincinnati Shakespeare in 2014, and Baldwin Wallace University in 2015) or using archive video available on YouTube (St. Louis Shakespeare in 2013, Victoria University of Wellington in 2014). Additionally, I thank Adam Heffernan, the director of the Baldwin Wallace production, for sharing his edited script.

¹⁵ Examples include the 2011 Atlanta Shakespeare Company production at the New American Shakespeare Tavern, in which the Jailer's Daughter distributed ribbons and did not dance (Gates) and the 2000 Globe dance that ended darkly when the Daughter collapsed (Taylor).

¹⁶ Cross-dressed female actors also played the Doctor as an exaggerated elderly man with an odd accent and the Wooer as an endearing character who promised earnestly he would not hurt the Daughter.

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Figures with captions



Figure 1: Woodcut on the title page of *Kemps nine daies vnder* (1600), a narrative of William Kemp's morris dance from Norwich to London. Reprinted in 1840, edited by Alexander Dyce, Harvard University.



Figure 2: "Mistress" Gerald performs for the nobles in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* at Baldwin Wallace University, October 2015. Photo by Will Bradford.



Figure 3: The morris dance in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* at Baldwin Wallace University, October 2015. Photo by Will Bradford.